

Draft letter from Alexander Graham Bell, February 10, 1894

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Beinn Bhreagh. Victoria County. Nova Scotia. Canada. February, 10th. 1894. To the Editor of the Educator:—

You have invited me to say a few words in reply to Mr. Jenkin's article communication upon "The Question of Signs" (published in the Education for December 1893) ; and also to express my own views upon the subject. In accordance with your request, I have read Mr. Jenkin's very able article published in your December number again — to with the care attention that it certainly deserves. I have also perused your editorial notes upon "Signs" published in the same number of your journal.

I. W. Jenkins Communication you say (p. 239) and very truly, I think,: — "There is as much difference between 'Signs' and a 'Sign-language', as between 'bricks' and a 'brick house'" !

Now it seems to me that the question raised by Mr. Jenkins is not so much a question of "Signs" as of "Sign-language" For no one objects to the use of the signs employed by ordinary bearing and speaking people when used in the same way that they employ them as mere accompaniments of English words; whereas very many people do object, as I do, to the employment of signs — as a language —for the expression of ideas quite independently of English.

Mr. Jenkins, however, maintains that the De l'Epee Sign-language the deaf do not possess a language at all except in is not a language at all in the true meaning that term, although we call it so in a and, just as we speaks a loose sense, just as we might speak of "the language of the stars",

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Dear Sir; —

You have requested me,

I. To reply to Mr. Jenkins's Article on the "Question of Signs", and

II. To state my own views upon the subject.

In accordance with your request I have examined with some care the very able article referred to, with the object of ascertaining its salient points; for it is obvious that it would be impossible to in the limited space of a journal like yours to attempt to consider the multitudinous details which have been elaborated by Mr. Jenkins, and which prove the earnestness of his convictions, and the great care he has expended in giving them utterance.

Under these circumstances I think it the duty of those who differ from Mr. Jenkins to do him the courtesy of reading his article thoughtfully and weigh his arguments with care.

He is so diffuse, however, it is difficult to grasp his argument as a whole; and many of his statements are mere assertions unsupported by evidence.

The general drift of the argument appears to me as follows: —

1. That in what is known as the Sign-language the Deaf do not have a language at all, excepting in a remote, or modified, or accommodated sense, just as when we speak of the "language of the stars, "the language of flowers &c."
2. That even admitting it to be a language, it is perfectly possible for children to learn two languages — both English and the Sign-language.
3. That this has been done in the Sign Schools, and,

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4. That just as big failures are to be found in Oral Schools as in Sign Schools

These seem to me to be his arguments in a nut shell.

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“the language of flowers &c.”: For example he says “It is customary among us to speak of the ‘Sign-language’, or the ‘Language of Signs’, but language is that which belongs to the tongue, lingua ; it is the utterance of vocal speech. In a remote, modified, accommodated sense, we may call it a language, just as we speak of the language of flowers, the language of the eyes, the language of the stars, or any other non-oral method of communication.”

Mr. Jenkins is certainly in error in thus seeking to limit the legitimate use of the word “language” to the utterance of vocal speech alone; for reference to the dictionary will show that it includes , as dictionaries “the expression of ideas by writing, or any other instrumentality” [Webster].

As we can express ideas through the instrumentality of the de l'Epee Sign-language alone, without recourse to English, we are justified I think in claiming, not only that it is a “language” (in the correct and proper use of that term, not in a loose sense), but that it is a distinct language — as distinct from English as French, or German, or any other spoken language tongue — notwithstanding Mr. Jenkins' objection so to consider it. He says:— (Paragraph 1)

“There is no special objection to the phrase ‘Sign-language’, unless an attempt be made to raise it to the dignity of a spoken language, and thus conceive of it 3 as coming into competition with the National speech, which its proper normal use never permits it to do”.

The fact is patent, however, and has never been denied, that it becomes the ordinary and usual means of communication — the “vernacular” so to speak — of many of our

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pupils; so that as a matter of fact it does come into competition with the National speech, whatever "its proper, normal use" may be. Pupils certainly are not sent to school to acquire, as a vernacular, a language not understood by the people among whom they live. That such a language should be employed as a means of communication and instruction in our public schools is contrary to the spirit and practice of American Institutions, (as our foreign immigrants have found out ; and it requires much popular stronger arguments than any employed by Mr. Jenkins to justify so un-American a proceeding in the case of the Deaf. In my opinion necessity alone could justify it — and necessity certainly has not been shown.

Mr. Jenkins then goes on to say [Point 2] says (Paragraph 2): — T hat even admitting, for the present , that the De l' Epee Sign-language does constitute a "language" in the true acceptation of that term, there is nothing improbable in the of children "acquiring 4 as any that can be shown in schools which do ; from which we may conclude that the use of the De l'Epee Sign-language is not the cause of the good English noticed in such cases.

If a good education, with a good command of the English language, can be obtained, without any recourse to the De l'Epee language of Signs, the question naturally arises, what need is there for the latter at all; but Mr. Jenkins does not touch this point. Multitudinous proofs that this is the fact, may be found among the graduates, not only of Oral schools, but of Manual Alphabet Schools like the Rochester School; and the case of Helen Keller, is a notable case in point, with which every one is familiar. ¶We all know, from statistics, that the percentage of pupils taught by the Oral Method, has increased very rapidly of recent years. Mr. Jenkins is probably right in attributing this increase largely to the fact, that where there are schools upon different plans "parents cannot be hindered from exercising their choice". I cannot agree with him, however, in the opinion he evidently entertains, that this process of selection by parents is a matter for regret; and that it would be better to leave the selection to experienced teachers like himself: For, experienced teachers differ radically in their views as to what is best, and "when doctors differ who shall

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decide”? Where the interests of their afflicted children are at stake, parents, I think, will be apt to make a careful choice.

This is however is the ground he takes for his charge that the Oral Method “is not increasing entirely on its merits”.

He says “the bait of teaching the deaf to talk just like other children” (the italics are his) “will be irresistible”. I don't think he is quite just to Oral schools in making such a sweeping charge as that: 4 two languages” though why it should be necessary that deaf children to learn two languages, when they find it hard enough to learn one alone, he does not presume to state. ; and he then goes on to claim (Paragraphs 3, 4 & 5) that this The rest of his article is intended to show that this is actually done in Sign-schools; and that in schools that do not employ the De l'Eppe sign-language as schools that do. sad failures are to be found as any that can be shown in those he do. through why it should be necessary for the children to acquire two languages — instead of one alone — he fails to state. (Go on to next page) From this latter circumstance he draws the inference that these failures are not due to the use of the De l'Epee Sign-language, but he fails to show that these schools also produce successes as great and as encouraging as any that can be shown in Sign-Schools, from which it is obvious that the De l'Epee Sign-language is not a necessity to the acquisition of the highest education and the mastery of the English language, both in its written and spoken forms.

Hundreds of graduates of Oral and Manual Alphabet Schools are living witnesses to this fact, which cannot now be denied; Helen Keller, herself, has acquired her wonderful command of the English language without the aide any knowledge of the De l'Epee language of Signs.

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For in the very same paragraph, () he the following state For example: In the very same paragraph from which this charge is quoted, he gives us the following statement which he assured us was made by a teacher of the Northampton School:—

“I have in mind now a girl whose articulation was so imperfect, that we said to her parents, ‘we think it best not to teach her articulation. We do not think she can learn it’”.

The articulation must surely have been pretty bad if an Oral teacher could possibly say that ! Certainly no “bait” was held out to the parents, that they could teach their child to talk “ just like other children ”: — And what was the result?

Mr. Jenkins says that the father, visiting the school some time later, “assured the teachers that he would rather have such articulation as his daughter had, than all the signs she could be taught”.

Mr. Jenkins confesses that he is unable to understand why this should be; but to me the explanation seems very obvious: The parents preferred poor speech — that was intelligible to them — to signs that they could not understand: And I think they were right.

We are too apt to lose sight of the fact that one of the main objects of the education of the Deaf, is to enable them to communicate with the hearing people among them they are to live when they leave our hands. The De l'Epee Sign-language has no value whatever as a means of communication with ordinary hearing and speaking persons, because they do not understand it: Whereas speech is of value for this purpose — even when poor — if it can be understood. Intelligibility, not perfection of utterance, is the measure of its value.

When I received your note, requesting me to write this article I presumed of course from Mr. Jenkins' well known attitude on the question of Signs that his paper contained some argument in favor of the use of the De L'Epee language of signs, to which I was expected to reply. I am surprised therefore to find upon careful perusal of the paper that there is no

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such argument there. The sum and substance of what he says appears to me to be as follows: —

The sign-language is not a language; I f it is, then deaf children can learn two, and they do in sign schools. Poor English is found in Oral as well as in Sign Schools. This, in brief, is the argument that I am expected to refute.

Mr. Jenkins evidently considers the last clause

If there is any argument in it at all it must surely be found in the last point named, which Mr. Jenkins considers to be so important that to be called the of sufficient importance to be termed the nux of the whole question,” although to me it appears simply a case of the kettle calling the pot “black”. Mr. Jenkins says: —

“All the errors peculiar to deaf-mutes in schools where signs are used, are found in the composition of pupils taught under the Oral Method. This is the nux of the whole question.”

I cant say that I agree with him at this conclusions, it is simply a case of the kettle calling the put alack. Of course lack of familiarity with the English language is of itself a sufficient cause for poor English, though it would not account, certainly I admit, for the appearance of peculiarities of expression apparently copying the idioms of the De l'Epee language of Signs. If, by the term “Errors peculiar to Deaf-mutes” he refers to peculiarities of this kind are found in the The same argument applies to natural signs. As our object is to make English the vernacular, of the deaf child, natural signs should be used more and more sparingly, as his education progresses,

The tendency should be to dispense with them altogether, and enable him to understand English words, with pleasure and profit English words, without the necessity of using signs of any sort.

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I might perhaps have written a story upon the board, about a man firing a gun at a squirrel upon a tree. I would then spell the words with the manual alphabet (in this case Dalgarno's glove-alphabet), and speak them simultaneously with my mouth.— with the same expression and emphasis — and jesticulation too — that I would have employed with a hearing child.

My constant aim was to be natural , that is to act just as I would have done if the child could hear.

My language was natural — but not stilted in expression or framed exclusively after some grammatical model — but just such as I would have employed in talking to a hearing and speaking child of his age. My utterance was natural neither faster nor slower than my ordinary rate, and with no mouthing or exaggerated movements of the vocal organs. My gestures were natural — just the same I, would have employed with a hearing child — and employed in just the same way.

The only thing that was un-natural about the whole performance, was the writing of the story upon the board before I told it to him; and the use use of two a two manual alphabet s simultaneously with speech.

After telling him the incident in this way — I would entertain him — by acting it out. I fired an imaginary gun, at an imaginary squirrel, upon an imaginary tree — just as I have often done in play, with my own hearing children at home. But are not these “Signs”? Yes — certainly — “Natural Signs” — but they are not the De l'Epee Signs.

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The princip als les I formulated for my own guidance was this; that in the instruction of the deaf, the proper use of signs is to illustrate English expressions — not to take their place.

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In accordance with this principal — while I frequently use d words without signs — I avoided the use of signs without words. My signs either accompanied the words as emphatic gestures, or came after as illustrative pantomime.

I used words first, actions afterwards; avoiding the converse. Thus reversing the process of “Action-writing” so commonly employed in our schools for the deaf; in which actions are given first, without words; and the pupils are required to describe them afterwards by writing or speech.

I do not mean to express the opinion that natural actions may not usefully, be employed in this way, as an exercise of composition, with older pupils, after familiarity with the English language has been gained; but I think the process is out of place in the initial stages of instruction.

If we examine the process by which hearing children acquire a knowledge of their vernacular, we find that the first step is — to comprehend the language. Hearing children understand a great deal of what is said to them long before they attempt to utter their first word. In the natural process, comprehension of the language is always attained to a considerable extent, before the child attempts to use the language himself, for the expression of his own thoughts.

Comprehension precedes expression and I do not think we should reverse this process in the case of the deaf.

The natural process of learning a language is by imitation.

Beinn Bhreagh. Victoria County. Nova Scotia. Canada. February 10th, 1894. To the Editor of the Educator.

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Dear Sir; — I have been much interested in Mr. Jenkin's article upon "the Question of Signs" published in your December Number [pp. 216 to 220]; and I have also read with profit your editorials upon the same subject.

You have said [p. 239], and very truly I think, that "there is as much difference between "Signs" and a "Sign-language", as between "bricks" and a "brick house"

Now it seems to me that the matter at issue is not so much a question of "Signs" as of "Sign-language": For no one objects to Natural Signs when used as ordinary hearing and speaking people employ them as mere accompaniments of English words; whereas a great many people do object to the use of Signs as a language, for the expression of ideas independently of English. Mr. Jenkins says [Point 1]:—

"It is customary among us to speak of the 'Sign-language' or the 'Language of Signs' but language is that which belongs to the tongue, lin gua ; it is the utterance of vocal speech. In a remote, modified, accommodated sense we may call it a language, just as we speak of the language of flowers, the language of the eyes, the language of the stars, or any other language of the stars, or nay other non-oral method of communication".

Mr. Jenkins is certainly in error in thus seeking to limit the legitimate use of the word 2 " language ", to the utterance of vocal speech alone; for it includes, as dictionaries show, "the expression of ideas by writing or any other instrumentality." [Webster].

If then we can express ideas through the instrumentality of signs we are justified in calling this m ea ns of communication a "language" of Signs; and if we can express ideas through this Sign-language without employing English at all, it is a distinct language; — distinct from English, like French or German or any other un-English tongue, in spite of Mr. Jenkin's objection to so consider it. He says:—

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“There is no special objection to the phrase ‘Sign-language’, unless an attempt be made to raise it to the dignity of a spoken language, and thus conceive of it as coming into competition with the National speech, which its proper normal use never permits it to do.”

If it is a distinct language from English and if it becomes the ordinary and usual means of communication — the “Vernacular” so to speak — of any of our pupils, it certainly comes “into competition with the National Speech”, whatever “its proper, normal use” may be. The fact is patent, and has never been denied, that it does become the ordinary and usual means of communication of a great many of our pupils; and this constitutes one of the great objections to its use. Pupils certainly are not sent to school to acquire as a vernacular, a language not understood by the people among whom they live.

That a language of this kind should be employed³ as a means of communication and instruction in the public schools of this country, is opposed to the spirit and practice of American Institutions as our French, German and Italian emigrants have found out; and it requires much stronger arguments than any employed by Mr. Jenkins to justify so un-American a proceeding in the case of the Deaf. In my opinion necessity alone could justify it — and necessity certainly has not been shown.

For example — He attempts to show [Point 2.] that even admitting Signs to constitute a language, that it is perfectly possible for children to learn two languages: English as well as the Sign-language: But he does not attempt to show why it should be necessary for poor little deaf children to be obliged to learn two languages, when they find it hard enough to learn one alone. The rest of his article is an attempt to prove, what alas! is only too self evident a fact, that they can produce in oral schools just as poor results as any they can show in Sign schools; but he does not admit, what is also I think a self evident fact, that they can produce as good mental development, as good command of written English as well as of speech, and good general scholarship — may be found among the graduates of